

Hardly anybody who reads or translates Herodotus will pay attention to the order of the adjectives in the following two examples:

(1) ἀνέθηκε ... οὗτος ἐς Δελφοὺς κρητῆρά ἀργύρεον μέγαν καὶ ὑποκρητηρίδιον σιδήρεον κολλητόν.

(He made an offering to Delphi of a great silver bowl on a stand of welded iron. Hdt. 1.25.2)

(2) καὶ ἐν τῷ τεμένει ὄβελοι ἑστᾶσι μεγάλοι λίθινοι, ...

(And in the precinct stand great stone obelisks. Hdt. 2.170.2)

Unjustly so, since there is a reason why the adjective μέγας in (1) follows ἀργύρεον, while it precedes λίθινοι in (2). The purpose of this paper is to discuss what determines the choice between the various possible positions of two or more adjectives in one noun phrase.

Although for Greek the order of multiple adjectives has never been analysed (our grammars only observe that various ordering patterns are possible), for other Indo-European languages (among which Latin) it has been the subject of some exploratory studies (Fries 1984, Hetzron 1978, Risselada 1983). The general outcome of these studies is that the order of adjectives is determined by semantics: the more ‘objective’ the quality expressed by the adjective (i.e. the more it is a matter of recognition instead of opinion), the closer it is to the noun. For example, adjectives expressing substance have to be placed closer to the noun than those expressing size, and the latter, in their turn, closer to the noun than adjectives expressing subjective evaluation (e.g. a beautiful big golden bowl).

On the basis of some 200 examples from Herodotus, I conclude, however, that in Greek the order of adjectives is not determined by the semantics of the adjectives (cf. (1) and (2) with similar adjectives in alternative orderings), but by the message the speaker wants to convey. My data suggest that the author may vary the order of adjectives dependent on the importance he attributes to the adjectives: the more informative the adjective, the earlier it is expressed. In (1), for instance, ἀργύρεον is placed before μέγαν to contrast the silver bowl with its iron stand (‘a great *silver* bowl’). In (2), on the other hand, the size of the obelisks is more informative than their substance, since stone is the usual material for obelisks (they are ‘*huge* stone obelisks’ instead of ‘huge *stone* obelisks’).

The advantage of this pragmatic analysis over the semantic analysis is that it can account for the use of an adjective-noun-adjective pattern (e.g. πεζὸς στρατὸς πολλός ‘a great land-force’ in Hdt. 6.43.4). In cases like this, the semantic analysis is inadequate, since the adjectives do not vary in their distance to the noun. Besides, a pragmatic explanation for the order of multiple adjectives is in line with Dik’s observation that the position of the adjective in relation to the noun is determined by the saliency of the adjective (cf. μέγαν κρητῆρά ‘a *big* bowl’ vs. κρητῆρά μέγαν ‘a big *bowl*’) (Dik 1997).

By discussing several more examples in their context, I hope to demonstrate that the order of adjectives should be given attention while reading or translating a Greek text. Since the order is dependent on the message the writer wants to convey, awareness of this ordering will result in a much more precise interpretation of the Greek text.